

## Film Studies 218: Film as a Subversive Art\*: The Critical Lens of Avant-garde Cinema

T/Th 2:30 – 3:55pm

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Office Hours: Tues/Thurs 1:00-2:30pm

\*\* Film screenings will occur Tuesdays at 8:30pm and Wednesdays at 6:00pm in Sills Smith Auditorium.

### Required texts (@ bookstore or available for purchase online):

P. Adams Sitney (Ed), *Film Culture Reader*

P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-garde, 1943-2000*

Amos Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art*

A.L. Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video*

Gwendolyn Foster & Wheeler Winston-Dixon, *Experimental Cinema: The Film Reader*

Other required readings will be placed on Blackboard

### General Notes About the Course:

1. **Please note that this course requires you to view films outside of class time.** Film screenings are mandatory. You will be required to see films each week, but you will have two viewing options: Tuesdays at 8:30pm and Wednesdays at 6:00pm in Sills Smith Auditorium. If you would like to review the film, the DVD will be on reserve at the Media Center *when possible*.
2. Readings should be prepared for the day on which they are listed on the course schedule. Please bring the reading(s) to class. Read with a pencil or pen: annotate your text: indicate points that seem important, cross-reference examples from screenings, and pose questions. *Come to class ready to discuss and ask questions.* This will be a discussion-oriented course; your questions and ideas matter, so please bring them with you to class.
3. Take notes on every film you watch for this course. As the film runs, jot down observations or ideas that occur to you. With avant-garde film, “gut” responses can be as important to note as intellectual ones. Also, since I will require weekly response papers in this class, I strongly suggest that, after the film is over, you take 5-10 minutes to jot down any questions you have about the film(s), and to write down your impressions about them and any thoughts on the theme(s) they bring up. You may find it helpful when doing this to consider questions brought up by the reading and/or the topic specified for that week. Please make this immediate reflection a routine practice. You’ll be shocked to discover how quickly details fade from your mind after you watch a film.
4. Readings are occasionally changed or swapped. Should you miss class, it is your responsibility to find out from a colleague whether any changes were made to the syllabus that day.
5. These films and readings deal with subjects appropriate to mature audiences. In some cases, they mean to offend you, in all cases, they intend to make you think and to question your basic beliefs. Please address them accordingly and be prepared to analyze your responses to them.

### Course Description

In French, *avant-garde* means "advance guard," a military term used for troops leading an attack across a battlefield. In film and art in general, the term describes a work that breaks new ground, often to experiment with the possibilities inherent within the medium or to express a different way of seeing the world and of living in it. As we will discover, this cinematic genre also thrives on critique, which occurs in part by challenging the aesthetic and social conventions held by film audiences. Avant-garde cinema is not easy to watch. It's difficult to “lose yourself” in these films, which demand that you engage with them – often on their own terms. As a result, avant-garde cinema has remained on the margins of the mainstream, generally ignored or rejected by mainstream audiences. But this cinema challenges us to examine how films make meaning and how they contribute to – or challenge – conventional notions of truth or reality.

In this course, we will study avant-garde cinema from the historical avant-garde period through the 1970s, with an emphasis on the work of U.S. filmmakers. The primary goal of this class is to introduce you to the world of avant-garde cinema so you can see how these films use their formal techniques to create and comment upon significant social and aesthetic experiences. In addition, this course will help you further hone your critical thinking and written argumentation skills through your analysis of the critiques developed by these avant-garde filmmakers. To this end, we will look at:

1. How to engage with these films by analyzing their formal characteristics, the ideas and objectives of the filmmakers who create them, and their reception by scholars. Our readings will provide insight into how filmmakers develop their techniques and projects in conversation with the theory and practice of other filmmakers, and in conversation with themselves, as they confront established conventions, encounter different ways of making films and making meaning, and the realization of their own work's limitations.
2. Productive ways to use your observations and knowledge about avant-garde cinema to talk and write about these films. My goal is to help you produce unique, contentious, and supported arguments about the films and film theory we'll be studying. These films, and the ideas that give rise to them, may challenge you to examine your own thoughts about film and about the world – but you should challenge these films too based on your own experiences, observations, and informed thinking.

### **Notes on Grading**

**Weekly response papers.** This course requires you to write response papers weekly that analyze the films we view for class. The purpose of these short papers is to challenge you to think about our films and think through what they're doing. To prepare for writing, I'd suggest you take notes *during the screenings* and write down your thoughts about the films *immediately after they screen*. Please be sure each short response paper has a basic thesis statement (however initial or tentative) and an argument that organizes your observations about the film and/or readings for the week. You should use these papers to develop your ideas about the films we see, to prepare for our class discussions by thinking through the issues raised by the films, and to examine the insights offered by our assigned readings and exploring their relationships to the films we see. Your papers should not review class notes, but you can use our classroom discussions as a jumping off point for your own explorations. Each paper should be a minimum of 500 words; the maximum is up to you. *Papers will be due Thursdays in class.*

### **Long-form Papers**

We will be expanding these response papers to longer-form papers. **Paper 1** will ask you to perform a formal analysis on one of the films we have viewed. In **Paper 2**, you will do a two-part analysis that examines the filmmaker's writings in relationship with his/her film. First, you will analyze the filmmaker's theory to establish a specific goal he or she wants to achieve through filmmaking or a claim they make about film's capabilities as an artistic medium. Second, you will analyze how their film's cinematography, mise-en-scene, and/or editing develop a particular theme by examining how the film realizes – or fails to realize – the filmmaker's claims or stated goal. **Paper 3** will invite you to expand your analysis by indicating how a film expresses a particular context or tradition. Once you have chosen a film to focus on, you will want to present your analysis based on: 1) how the film fits into a particular avant-garde tradition or movement OR 2) how the engages in an implicit or explicit dialogue with another film or filmmaker's theory we have studied.

### **Participation and quizzes**

Participation is crucial to learning and will thus be a determining factor in final grade calculation, both positively (comments and questions you offer in class, quality of work completed and deadlines met) and negatively (negligence in work). Attendance is crucial to participation: if you don't show up, you can't participate, which means we lose your insights and you'll miss out on ours. You will have two "free passes" for unexcused absences, but after that, each unexcused absence will result in a 1/2-letter grade deduction from your course average (i.e., if your average is 94, your third unexcused absence will knock it down to a 90, the fourth to an 85, etc.). College-approved holidays count as excused absences, but leaving early for holiday breaks or for games/team travel will not constitute excused absences.

I do not accept late work except in the case of holidays or documented medical or family emergencies. For each day a paper is late, 1/3 letter grade will be deducted. Also, quizzes cannot be made up. Attending film screenings is mandatory since I can't guarantee the availability of films for viewing outside of class. Some of these films *are not available on Netflix or online* so please make arrangements for alternative viewing options.

### **Grade Breakdown:**

<b>Quizzes</b> (4 essay-based quizzes that ask you to respond to readings &/or films)	10%
<b>Response Papers</b> (collected on the Thursday following the film screening)	25%
<b>Paper 1</b> (5 pages)	15%
<b>Paper 2</b> (7-9 pages)	20%
<b>Paper 3</b> (8-10 pages)	20%
<b>Participation</b>	10%

**I adhere to the Honor Code, and expect you to do the same.** Professors notice when your writing style or competency changes suddenly. Don't plagiarize! Instead, turn in your own work and learn where your strengths lie and what you need to improve upon.

## **Course Schedule**

### ***Sept 2: Welcome, Course Introduction, Getting to Know You, Fun with Avant-garde Film***

#### ***IN THE BEGINNING...***

#### **Week 1: The Cinema of Attractions**

**Screening:** Selected short films:

From *The Movies Begin: Experimentation and Discovery: How It Feels To Be Run Over* (Hepworth Mfg. Co. 1900); *Peeping Tom* (Pathé Frères 1901); *The Gay Shoe Clerk* (Edison Manufacturing Co. 1903); and *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend* (Edwin S. Porter, 1906)

From *The Movies Begin: The Great Train Robbery & Other Primary Works: The Kiss* (Edison Shorts 1896), *Serpentine Dances* (Edison Shorts 1895); *A Trip To The Moon* (Georges Méliès 1902); and *The Great Train Robbery* (Edwin S. Porter, 1903)

**Sept 7:** *History of Experimental Film* 15-19; Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions" & "'Now You See It, Now You Don't': The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions" (electronic resources)

**Sept 9:** Tom Gunning, "Non-Continuity, Continuity, Discontinuity" and Richard Abel, "The Cinema of Attractions in France, 1896-1904" (electronic resources); *response paper due*

[*Response paper thought-starters:* What is the "cinema of attractions"? What is its place in cinema history and its relationship to narrative and avant-garde filmmaking? How do the attractions in these films function? If they're not helping to tell a story or develop a theme, what are they doing?]

#### **Week 2: The Historical Avant-garde: Europe**

**Film screenings:** *Un chien andalou* (Luis Buñuel, France, 1928, 14 min) and *Le sang d'un poète* (*Blood of a Poet*, Jean Cocteau, 1930, 55 min)

**Sept 14:** *History of Experimental Film* Introduction and 19-56; Jean Goudal "Surrealism and cinema," and "Bridging Purism and Surrealism: The Origins and Production of Fernand Léger's *Ballet Mécanique*" [Recommended: Antonin Artaud "Sorcery and Cinema" and Man Ray "Cinemage"] (electronic resources)  
**In-class screening:** *Ballet Mécanique* (Fernand Léger, France, 1924, 19min)

**Sept 16:** *Film as a Subversive Art* 45-52, 60-68; Jean Cocteau "Postscript" (on *Blood of a Poet*), Luis Buñuel "The cinema, instrument of poetry" and Stuart Liebman "*Un Chien andalou*: The Talking Cure" (electronic resources); *response paper due*; **Quiz 1**

### **Week 3: The Historical Avant-garde: the U.S.**

**Screenings:** *The Life and Death of 9413, a Hollywood Extra* (Slavko Vorkapich & Robert Florey, 1928), *The Fall of the House of Usher* (James Sibley Watson & Melville Webber, 1933), *H2O* (Ralph Steiner, 1929), and *Manhatta* (Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler, 1921)

**Sept 21:** Jan-Christopher Horak “The first American film avant-garde” (*Exp. Cinema Reader*) Lucy Fischer “The Films of James Sibley Watson, Jr. and Melville Webber: A Reconsideration” (electronic resource)

**Sept 23:** Kristin Thompson “The limits of experimentation in Hollywood,” excerpts from Brian Taves “Robert Florey and the Hollywood avant-garde,” Scott MacDonald “Ralph Steiner” and Jan-Christopher Horak “Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler’s *Manhatta*” (electronic resources); *response paper due*

### **Week 4: Film as the Seventh Art: Integrating Poetry and Dance (Rejecting Theatre and Narrative)**

**Screening:** Maya Deren *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1945-6, 15min); Marie Menken, *Visual Variations on Noguchi* (1945, 4 min); *La Coquille et le clergyman* (Germaine Dulac, France, 1927, 35 min)

**Sept 28:** *History of Experimental Film* 56-62; Judith Mayne “Women in the Avant-garde” (*Experimental Cinema Reader*); Maya Deren, Arthur Miller, Dylan Thomas, Parker Tyler, Willard Maas, and Amos Vogel, “Poetry and the Film: A Symposium” (*Film Culture Reader*), Maya Deren, “Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality” (electronic resource) **Quiz 2**

**Sept 30:** *Film as a Subversive Art* 98-101; Please scan Sitney, “Ritual and Nature” in *Visionary Film* and read Germaine Dulac “Aesthetics, Obstacles, Internal *Cin graphie*” and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis “The Image and the Spark: Dulac and Artaud Reviewed” (electronic resources); *response paper due*

### **Paper 1 due**

### **THE POLITICS OF AESTHETICS**

### **Week 5: The Origins of New Cinema**

*Film screening:* Jean-Luc Godard, *Vivre sa vie* (1962, 80min)

**Oct 5:** *Film as a Subversive Art* 83-88, 120-138, 318-325; Peter Wollen “Godard and Counter Cinema: *Vent d’Est*” and “The Two Avant-gardes” (electronic resources)

**Oct 7:** Kaja Silverman and Harun Farocki “Nana is an Animal” (electronic resource); *response paper due*

**\*\* Use the readings for this week to explore how Godard develops a particular theme within *Vivre sa vie*. As you think through which themes the film examines, please pay special attention to how Godard investigates social issues in contemporary France.**

### **Week 6: The Origins of New American Cinema: Shadows**

*Film screening:* John Cassavetes, *Shadows* (U.S., 1959, 87 min)

**Oct 12:** Fall Vacation

**Oct 14:** Sitney, Chapter 2 Introduction in *Film Culture Reader* 71-72; Jonas Mekas, “The Experimental Film in America,” “A Call for a New Generation of Film-Makers,” “The First Statement of the New American Cinema” and “Notes on the New American Cinema” Group” in *Film Culture Reader*; *response paper due*

### **Week 7: Seeing (for) One's Self: Stan Brakhage**

*Film screening:* Stan Brakhage, *Dog Star Man* (U.S., 1961-1964, 79 min)

**Oct 19:** *History of Experimental Film* 62-69; Brakhage interview with P. Adams Sitney (opening section of *Metaphors on Vision*, electronic resource) and “Major Mythopoeia” in *Visionary Film*

**Oct 21:** Stan Brakhage, “Metaphors on Vision” & “Camera Eye” *Metaphors on Vision* (electronic resource); [Recommended: Suranjan Ganguly “Stan Brakhage: The 60<sup>th</sup> Birthday Interview” (*Experimental Cinema Reader*)]; *response paper due*; **Quiz 3**

### **Week 8: Rebel Without a Cause: Society's Influence on the “Individual”**

*Film screening:* Kenneth Anger, *Scorpio Rising* (U.S., 1964, 28 min)

**Oct 26:** Amos Vogel, “The Taboo Image,” Juan A. Suarez “Pop, Queer, or Fascist? The Ambiguity of Mass Culture in Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising*” in *Experimental Cinema*  
*In-class film screening:* Kenneth Anger, *Kustom Kar Kommandos*, 1965, 3 min

**Oct 28:** *Film as a Subversive Art* 192-257; scan Sitney, “The Magus” in *Visionary Film* and Schneemann, “Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising*” in *Film Culture Reader*; James, “Film that Cannot Be One: Kenneth Anger” (electronic resource); *response paper due*

### **Week 9: Self-Fetishization: Control Yourself!**

*Film screening:* Andy Warhol *Chelsea Girls* (U.S., 1966, 210 min)

**Nov 2:** *History of Experimental Film* 70-72; Callie Angell, “Andy Warhol, Filmmaker,” Jonas Mekas “Notes After Reseeing the Movies of Andy Warhol”

**Nov 4:** Warhol interview with Gretchen Berg: “My True Story” and with Gerard Malanga: “My Favorite Superstar: Notes on My Epic. *Chelsea Girls*” from *I’ll Be Your Mirror: The Selected Andy Warhol Interviews* (electronic resources) and Juan A. Suárez “The Artist as Advertiser” (electronic resource); *response paper due*

### **Paper 2 due**

### **Week 10: Structuralist Film**

**Screening:** Michael Snow, *Wavelength* (U.S. and Canada, 1967, 45 min.)

*UBU screening:* Hollis Frampton, *Zorns Lemma*

**Nov 9:** *History of Experimental Film* 72-75; *Film as a Subversive Art* 89-97, 106-107; P. Adams Sitney “Structural Film” in *Experimental Cinema Reader*

**Nov 11:** Scott MacDonald “Interview with Michael Snow” and Peter Gidal “An Interview with Hollis Frampton” in *Experimental Cinema Reader*; *response paper due*

### **Week 11: Found Footage or Collage Films**

**Screening:** Bruce Conner *Report* (U.S., 1967, 13 min) and *Crossroads* (U.S., 1976, 36 min)

**Nov 16:** Hans Richter “The Film as an Original Art Form” (*Film Culture Reader*) and excerpt from Art Simon, *Dangerous Knowledge: The JFK Assassination in Art and Film* (electronic resource)

**Nov 18: Class cancelled; Please read:** Excerpts from *2000 BC: the Bruce Conner story part II* and David James “A Filmmaker: Bruce Conner” from *Allegories of Cinema* (electronic resources); **3-page response paper due by 3pm today (please upload on Digital Dropbox)**

### **Week 12: Avant-garde Gender**

*Film screening:* Marjorie Keller, *Misconception* (U.S., 1977, 44 min)

**Nov 23:** Lauren Rabinovitz “The Woman Filmmaker in the New York Avant-garde” (*Experimental Cinema Reader*); Michelle Citron, Julia Lesage, Judith Mayne, B. Ruby Rich, and Anna Marie Taylor, “Women and Film: A Discussion of Feminist Aesthetics” from *New German Critique*, No. 13, Special Feminist Issue. (Winter, 1978), pp. 82-107 (electronic resource); Marjorie Keller “Women and Film” and Robin Blaetz “Amnesia Time: The Films of Marjorie Keller” (electronic resources); *Film as a Subversive Art* 258-262 **Quiz 4**

**Nov 25:** Thanksgiving Break **\*\* Response paper due Nov. 30**

### **Week 13: Avant-garde Race**

*Film Screening:* Bill Gunn, *Ganja and Hess* (U.S., 1973, 110 min)

**Nov 30:** Excerpt from Melvin Van Peebles, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song: A Guerilla Filmmaking Manifesto* and Frantz Fanon *Black Skin, White Masks* (electronic resources)

**Dec 2:** Manthia Diawara & Phyllis R. Klotman “Ganja and Hess: Vampires, Sex, and Addictions” *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Black Film Issue (Summer, 1991), pp. 299-314 (electronic resources); *response paper due*

### **Week 14: Avant-garde in the Digital Age**

*No film screening in Sills Smith Auditorium; please visit UBU online to view assigned films:* Sam Taylor-Wood *Breach* (2001), *Pietà* (2001) and *Still Life* (2001); Sharon Lockhart *Lunch Break* (2009);

**Dec 7:** Excerpt from “Two Futures for Electronic Images, or What Comes after Photography” from *The Virtual Life of Film* (electronic resource)

**Dec 9: Last day of class; Paper 3 due**